

## CHAPTER 12

### **High Demand for Tertiary Studies Encourages Corrupt Practices for Entry**

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#### **Abstract**

This study is about the increasing demand for tertiary studies in the Solomon Islands. With limited spaces available in our local institutions, parents are using bribes to get placements for their children. This is starting to get worse as more and more secondary schools are introducing year 12 and 13 to their schools, but our local tertiary institutions like the Solomon Islands National University are not expanding to cater for the growing numbers of secondary school leavers. Parents are competing for the limited spaces available at tertiary institutions for their children; therefore, they resort to bribes so that their children are selected.

My participants are 30 parents who have been looking for spaces and I have carried out my research over the three past years from 2017 to 2019. Participants are a mixture of both male and females. I interviewed each one for approximately five minutes. The interviews were transcribed and findings are based on the analysis of the transcriptions.

The key findings reveal that parents mostly use money and other valuables in trying to lure the officers of the university to issue them offer letters of placement. Parents also use their relatives working in the university to help them secure spaces for their children. This might sound like corrupt practice, but it indicates the high demand for tertiary education in the Solomon Islands. Parents are desperate for their children to enter tertiary education; therefore, they will try every possible way for their children to reach tertiary education level.

#### **Introduction**

My research focuses on the demand for tertiary studies in Solomon Islands. When a local tertiary institution puts a limit to the number of spaces for its programmes, parents will try their best to ensure that their children are

enrolled in the courses that are available, especially those courses that are in high demand in the job markets. This situation is intensifying as more and more secondary schools are introducing years 12 and 13 into their schools and, as a result, there are more senior secondary school leavers wanting to enroll at tertiary institutions. However, tertiary institutions cannot cater for the many senior secondary school leavers of the country. Parents are competing for the limited spaces available at tertiary institutions for their children; therefore, in an effort to ensure their children are selected, many resort to some form of corrupt practice before the actual selection process takes place.

The aim of this paper is to show that when there are not enough tertiary institutions available in a developing country such as Solomon Islands and, when there are many secondary school leavers, parents will try to use bribes for placements of their children. Use of bribes is also a big problem when it comes to scholarships because many parents in the Solomon Islands cannot afford to send their children to tertiary education overseas except through scholarships. When the competition for scholarships is very tough because of the limited number, parents opt to use bribes to lure scholarship officers to select their children.

This paper is very important because it reveals that corrupt practices exist within our public offices like the Student Academic Office and Scholarship Office. On the other hand, it also indicates that there is a high demand for tertiary education in the Solomon Islands and other South Pacific Islands countries today. It is a signal to the government that it must expand its tertiary institutions to cater for the vast numbers of secondary school leavers aspiring to enter tertiary institutions. It is feared that if these students are not absorbed by the tertiary institutions and the job markets, they are at risk of becoming engaged in criminal activity.

## **Contextual and theoretical framework**

According to an Asian Development Bank (2012) report, there is very limited capacity in terms of both access and quality of higher education throughout the Pacific Island countries. Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, there is still inadequate access to education for all children. This situation contributed to the growth of an uneducated and idle youth that led to the social unrest in the Solomon Islands between 2000 and 2003 (UNICEF, 2014). Even today, nearly twenty years after the social unrest with considerable improvement in school access and retention rates, students at secondary and tertiary levels are still poorly equipped to compete for scarce jobs in the country (Maebuta & Spence, as cited in UNICEF Report,

2014). Even though the government of the Solomon Islands has claimed that tertiary education will be available at a wide variety of institutions both locally and overseas (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2010b), the intakes to these institutions do not cater for many of the Solomon Islands students completing their secondary education every year. To make the situation worse, the number of scholarships for overseas studies is also limited and sometimes nepotism is also involved.

According to Mauro (as cited by Larmour, 1997), in some countries in the South Pacific, some officials who hold high positions in any organisations might be favouring their own relatives and their own ethnic groups when comes to promotion, intake of new workers, allocation of scholarships, and selection of new students. This practice is known as wantokism in Solomon Islands and often involves the use of money and other valuables by parents to bribe officers to get placements for their children at the university or to get government scholarships. Gifts can range from a few hundred dollars up to several thousand dollars. This is regarded as corruption in this modern age, but to those parents, especially from the rural areas of the Solomon Islands, it is a Melanesian traditional practice of gift-giving to say, "Thank you for helping my child". According to Larmour (1997), the distinction between traditional gifts and modern bribes creates two possibilities to explore. He poses the questions, "What did traditional bribes look like? And what do modern gifts look like?"

There are many hardworking Solomon Islands students who aim high to reach university level. At the end of their secondary life, they achieve very good grades but, because of nepotism and the limited number of scholarships for overseas tertiary institutions, they cannot make it. Using money and other valuables to get placements at the university or scholarship will deprive many very good students who do not have access to such money or valuables. Also, there are some parents who are quite shy about approaching officers for placements or scholarships for their children if they are not selected. Shyness is one of the characteristics of most Melanesian people who seem to accept what is given. The children of such shy parents will be left out from attending tertiary institutions or getting scholarships even though these students are academically capable.

The people of the Pacific Island countries are starting to realize the importance of modern education now more than before. There has been a great deal of change happening in the Pacific Islands countries during this century and one of those is in the education system. The development of a good tertiary education, either academic or non-academic is necessary,

as it prepares our human resources for the “knowledge economy” of any country (MEHRD, 2010a). However, despite the efforts of governments to diversify education and technical, agricultural, and other forms of non-academic institutions, the demand for academic-type institutions is still high, with many parents and pupils continuing to demand academic education and reluctant to accept non-academic forms of education (Baba, 2000).

**Data participants and methods**

My participants are mostly parents. They are the ones that usually approach the Student Academic Office and the office of programme coordinators for additional placements if their children are not accepted.

Bachelor of teaching secondary programme since it first started in 2013

<b>Year</b>	<b>Projected number</b>	<b>Actual enrolled</b>
2013	100	29
2014	100	45
2015	100	40
2016	100	80
2017	100	177
2018	150	300
2019	150	300

Source: Office of Bachelor of teaching secondary programme, SINU

I have interviewed about 30 parents since 2017 where the demand for Solomon Islands National University (SINU) placements has been rising since more secondary schools have been introducing year 12 and 13 to their schools. I have interviewed approximately 10 parents at the beginning of each year on how they managed to get offer letters. Many parents prefer their children to attend SINU especially for courses like teaching and nursing because these jobs are readily available. Doing courses at the USP (University of the South Pacific) center will take much longer than going

through SINU because it offers its courses through distance flexible mode and it is more expensive.

Many parents preferred their children who have reached year 12 and 13 in secondary schools to attend tertiary institutions like Solomon Islands National University, USP, University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and other universities overseas.

Parents reveal two things they can use to lure university officers to help them:

- Money or other valuables
- Relatives working at the university

### **Discussion and analysis**

The demand for academic tertiary education is increasing

For their children to get tertiary qualifications from universities and colleges is a dream and a blessing for many parents in the South Pacific Island countries, including the Solomon Islands, who believe that good qualifications will lead to work in the government and private sectors of their countries (Ramoni, 2000).

A few top students completing year 13 will be given scholarships to study overseas mainly in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. Most of the students that are awarded in- country scholarships will study at the Solomon Islands National University (95%) and only 5% at the University of the South Pacific Center through the distance and flexible learning mode (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2017). Most of our year 13 cohort is aiming to study overseas and this is their first option. Studying locally is their second option.

Many parents interviewed want their children to attend the Solomon Islands National University rather than doing courses through the distance flexible learning mode at the University of the South Pacific because of the time factor and cost. The programmes that are offered at SINU are mostly conducted by face-to-face mode and they are much cheaper than those offered by USP (Alijazer, 2019). Diploma programmes like teaching and nursing offered by SINU will only take two years and they are still in a high demand in the job market in the Solomon Islands. Parents prefer short courses like the ones offered by SINU so that their children can graduate early and help them as soon as they are employed by the government or private sector. However, the Solomon Islands National University limits

the numbers for each of its programmes because of the space problem in the classroom due to offering its courses through face-to-face mode, whereas the University of the South Pacific Center does not need to limit numbers because of its distance and learning mode. Most of our senior secondary students will end up attending the USP center rather SINU because SINU simply does not have enough spaces to enrol them.

The people of the Pacific Island countries are starting to realize the importance of modern education, more now than before. There has been a great deal of change happening in the Pacific Island countries, including Solomon Islands, during this century; including much change in the education system. The development of a good tertiary education, either academic or non-academic, is necessary as it prepares our human resources for the “knowledge economy” of any country (MEHRD, 2010b). In the Solomon Islands, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) has taken the initiative to help strengthen the work of Vocational Rural Training Centers (RTCs) which are mostly run and funded by churches; Community-based Training Centers (CBTS) which are mostly run and funded by certain communities; and finally Village-based Education Programmes which are mainly run and funded by each individual village to help their people in certain life skills. The Ministry of Education established the Non-formal Education Division (Community Education) to look to the affairs of these schools (Ramoni, 2000).

However, as noted by Baba (2000), despite the efforts of governments to diversify education and to strengthen technical, agricultural, and other forms of non-academic institutions, the demand for academic institutions is still high, with many parents and pupils reluctant to accept a non-academic type of education which they regard as second class. Thus, parents resort to bribery or using relatives to secure places for their children in these academic institutions. However, as Larmour (1997) points out, the distinction between traditional gifts and modern bribes may be explored.

### Bribery – corruption or traditional gift giving?

Solomon Islands, as a small developing island state just recovering from a period of political instability and civil unrest, still has many weak central institutions and some specific governance challenges associated with the management of natural resources (Chene, 2017). Therefore, corrupt practices still exist in some public and private offices, especially with money. There are some public officers of the government who demand extra money for their own pockets for the fast processing of the job they usually do for the public. Sometimes it is the public who

lure the government officers to fasttrack what they want by giving the government officers extra money for their personal use. According to the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2017), the findings relating to scholarships recipients in the Solomon Islands were enlightening but also raised many more questions and possible areas for enquiry.

Using money and other valuables to get placements at the university or to get scholarships will deprive many very good students who do not have enough money to provide bribes or do not have relatives working for the institution office. Many of the parents that I have interviewed are from the rural areas and they are desperate that their children attend tertiary institutions so that they can help them (the parents) in the future. The parents do not see the giving of gifts like money to responsible officers as bribery or corruption, but rather as a Melanesian traditional practice of giving a token of appreciation to say, “Thank you for helping my child”.

#### Using relatives – nepotism or wantokism?

Parents are using their own relatives and friends working at the university to get placements for their children if they miss out in the selection process for the new intakes. According to Fangalasuu and Bateman (2015), “Solomon Islands National University and other university campuses in Solomon Islands are under pressure to provide space for increased student numbers and also face pressure of staff student ratios and access to suitable equipments and facilities” (p. 53). This is getting worse every year as more secondary schools are expanding to cater for more years 12 and 13 resulting in more senior secondary school students leavers competing for places in tertiary institutions both locally and overseas.

Mauro (as cited by Larmour, 1997) states that some officials holding high positions in any organisations might be favouring their own relatives and their own ethnic groups when comes to promotions, intake of new workers, scholarships, and selection of new students. This is mainly referred as *wantokism* in Melanesian society. This is a problem when it comes to our culture because our relatives are expecting us (workers of the university) to help them to get placements for their children at the university. It becomes a cultural obligation that older siblings must help their younger siblings and relatives to be educated at the university. If we do not help our relatives in this way, then they will see us as bad relatives.

## **Conclusion**

The demand for tertiary studies in Solomon Islands today is high compared to the past. When local tertiary institutions limit the number of spaces available for its programmes, parents will try their best to ensure that at least their children are enrolled in the courses that are available, especially those courses providing qualifications that are in high demand in the job market. This has led to parents feeling they have no option but to resort to some form of corrupt practices so that their children are selected. The most commonly-used bribes are money and other valuables. Parents also use their relatives working at the institutions to help them secure spaces for their children. Corrupt practices are also involved in certain government offices like the scholarship office. This situation indicates that there is a high demand for tertiary education in the Solomon Islands. It is a signal to the government that it must expand its tertiary institutions to cater for the vast numbers of secondary school leavers aspiring to enter tertiary institutions.

### **The study's strengths and weaknesses**

This study's strengths are that the research work was carried over a period of three years with approximately 30 participants involved. The participants are mostly parents who have been looking for spaces for their children and who have ended up in my office.

The weaknesses are that the participants are not randomly selected, and my participants are only parents so I do not get the views of the students.

### **Recommendations**

There is a need to do more research on this area on the views of both the parents and the students. The participants involved must be randomly selected. The data from the student academic office for all schools' enrolments must be obtained to see the trend of enrolment of the whole university for the past years rather than for one programme only.

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